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# The Sari Soldiers Directed by Julie Bridgham, Produced by Julie Bridgham and Ramyata Limbu; Reviewed by Rama Lohani Chase

Rama Lohani Chase

*Institute of Advanced Communication, Education and Research*

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political system. But only those few civil society organizations that supported the system were allowed to operate. This point has been ignored in the book. The third stage of civil society, which seems to have occurred after 1990, can be termed “anti-authoritarian,” as civil society organizations, particularly NGOs, were geared towards building democratic institutions, respecting human rights, and promoting grassroots alternative development and transparency. The involvement of civil society organizations in these areas could be because of their self-interest also. They could work freely in a democratic political system. Moreover, they knew that this system enabled them to improve their condition. Therefore, they worked against authoritarian rule. Their activities certainly reached a climax during King Gyanendra’s direct rule.

The author is right that civil society organizations, mainly NGOs, were in touch with Maoists during the armed conflict. But this was more so for continuing development work than for supporting Maoist political ideology. A few NGOs at the national level had good relations with Maoists. Most NGOs at the district level continued their work, negotiating with the conditions imposed by the Maoists.

The author’s implicit argument that the funding by external donors of civil society weakened the State is also largely unfounded. Civil society, as a whole, still receives only a fraction (13 %) of external funds that comes to Nepal. The State has far more control of external funding. Therefore, the role of external funding in catapulting civil society to prominence seems largely overstated by the author. Moreover, the relative economic independence of people because of the gradual breakdown of feudal relations—thanks to globalization and increased mobility and remittances—was also a force for their political activism through various associations.

I am also not satisfied with other claims of the author, namely that after the regime change the activism of civil society declined (p 43); that there was no reduction in political killings and violence after the regime change (p 43); and that external interests wanted to make Nepal secular (p 46). It is a fact that political killings declined after the regime change. Political killing was at its height during the King’s rule from 2004 to 2005. On average 6 people were killed every day. After the regime change, the political killing declined drastically, despite some growth of armed organizations in the Tarai. The activities of civil society, particularly NGOs, have increased, and even their funding base has grown. But the media has not given much coverage to the activism of civil society in the post Jana Andolan period. During the Jana Andolan period, the media adopted a single mission—restoring democracy—because it knew that it flourished only in this political environment. Similarly, the declaration of Nepal as a secular state was more in response to the pressure from indigenous groups. Maoists wanted to have secularism because they had promised non-Hindu groups, especially the Janajatis, that they would remove Hinduism as the national religion and make the country secular. Moreover, a Hindu State would be against the Maoists principle of “class struggle.” Other parties

in the SPA also opposed a Hindu State, even though they were not so vocal in this respect as the Maoists. In fact, in 1960 the Nepali Congress had promulgated a constitution declaring Nepal to be a secular state.

Despite these criticisms, *Civil Society in Uncivil Places* provides an understanding of how civil society can be an important actor in political change. The only weakness of the book is that it seems to exaggerate the role of civil society in regime change in Nepal and the role of external funding in their activity.

*Jagannath Adhikari researches environment and development issues. His most recent book is Food Crisis in Karnali: A Historical and Politico-economic Perspective. His email is jagannath.adhikari@gmail.com.*

## THE SARI SOLDIERS

DIRECTED BY JULIE BRIDGHAM,  
PRODUCED BY JULIE BRIDGHAM AND  
RAMYATA LIMBU

New York: Women Make Movies, DVD, 92 minutes, 2008.

### REVIEWED BY RAMA LOHANI CHASE

*The Sari Soldiers* is a documentary shot live during the last few years of Nepal’s armed conflict, called the People’s War, which lasted for more than a decade (1996-2006). It captures the multiple dynamics of the civil war in Nepal, which claimed more than thirteen thousand lives and caused hundreds of disappearances, placing Nepal near the top of the list of countries with human rights violations. Initially, I wondered whether this documentary’s title was another exotic play on words that further victimizes third world women as metaphors in a cross-cultural transaction. However, the oxymoronic juxtaposition of “sari” and “soldiers” is apt if understood in the context of a heavily patriarchal society where women are seldom expected to lead, show courage, or fight as soldiers are expected to do. The term “sari soldiers” could even help to redefine the gendered connotation of what bravery, courage, and leadership mean or the type of gender that can embody these qualities. In other words, we ought not to understand the role of soldier only on the battlefield.

Six courageous women are the key protagonists in the film. Militants and soldiers of peace, justice, human rights and democracy appear in the forms of Devi, Mandira and Ramkumari. With persistence and resilience, Devi Sunuwar, a poor *dalit* woman, seeks justice for her minor daughter Maina, who was accused of being a Maoist, and abducted and

murdered by the Royal Nepal Army. The human rights lawyer Mandira's passion shows as she devotes herself to helping Devi's cause. And the student Ramkumari Jhakri imparts in the film that democracy can come only through peaceful activism on the street. No one should question the strength and wisdom in these women, who are brave soldiers of their own kind, the sari kind. *The Sari Soldiers* shows that traditional militarism is not the only path to show bravery, nationalism or patriotism.

*The Sari Soldiers* also presents us with women, some on opposite sides of the protracted war, who display courage in a variety of ways. Kranti (Kamala Roka), a soft-spoken brigadier commissar in the Maoists' Peoples Liberation Army, is a widow and a mother of two children, and her nom de guerre means "revolution." Kranti's words echo the sentiment of the Maoist Communist Party of Nepal and many who supported the war: "Where there is war and revolution, there is bound to be sacrifice." She speaks of the hardships, poverty, gender discrimination, and the two kinds of Nepalis: the "haves" and "have nots." She dreams of an egalitarian society and differentiates the war she is fighting from other violent strategies. "We are drawing Nepali people to a beautiful future," she says, "we are not terrorists." Unlike Kranti, who fights to topple the status quo, Rajani leaves her studies in medicine to join the recently opened female battalion of the Royal Nepal Army. As she tells the camera, because her only brother died in combat with the Maoists, it became her obligation to take revenge. She says, "it's for my brother ... if they are going to shoot me, I am not going to just stand and watch ... I am ready." Although Rajani's words seem tough as she prepares herself for the life of a military woman, watching her interact with her family, who clearly worry about her safety, and seeing her room plastered with celebrity pictures and stuffed animals makes one wonder where these opposites meet.

It was an interesting time in Nepal's history when the army courted young women like Rajani. As the new king launched the military into war and announced the state of emergency, the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Ordinance (TADO) gave enormous power to the security forces and allowed unlawful arrest of anyone, making *habeas corpus* defunct. In a country where women were previously not allowed to join the army as soldiers (they could join the service and administration department), many women activists welcomed the news as empowering. Yet, without rendering explicit judgment, the film invites its viewers to wonder whether embracing militarism results in a net positive or negative for Nepali women. For the very institution that women were joining for empowerment was behaving in bizarre and demeaning ways towards the Nepali people, including women and girls. If not for TADO, 15-year old Maina Sunuwar, Devi's daughter, would not have been tortured and murdered. Arrested in February of 2004, Maina's whereabouts remained unknown until December of 2006. The film shows how the quest to find her brought together her mother Devi and Mandira, the human rights lawyer. If documentary is a form of activism

that works by raising consciousness about violence, atrocities, and loss of humanity, *The Sari Soldiers* certainly succeeds in that. It also raises important questions about impunity and the need for an international body of justice. Without international pressure, Maina's parents would have never found their daughter's bones and had some kind of closure.

As supporters of the king, Krishna, the village leader, and Rajani, the Nepal Army officer, represent the more controversial voices during the conflict. However, the documentary puts their voices in perspective: Krishna's relatives suffered from Maoist violence in her village, and Rajani's only brother was killed by the Maoists while serving in the Nepal Army. While Rajani's vengeance against the Maoists comes from personal tragedy, Krishna targets all political parties except the monarchy. Given the ways in which the political parties have behaved, it is no wonder many women in her village agree with her. An openly royalist Krishna becomes a leader to the villagers not only to protest against the Maoists but also against the opportunistic political leaders who left them to fend for themselves. She stands in stark contrast to the revolutionary Kranti of the PLA, but the documentary permits the women to articulate their ideological positions themselves. One of the film's most fascinating achievements is that the audience is able to empathize with each woman and her circumstances.

The documentary centers on the experiences of women and girls, their despair and hope, their endurance and courage during the war years. Their stories are not only about soldiering by women facing extraordinary circumstances; they reveal a spectrum of difference and diversity in the ways in which women became political, social, and cultural activists as well as military personnel. While focusing on women's lived experience, emphasizing self-representation, and highlighting issues of gender and caste-class based discrimination, *The Sari Soldiers* provides a nuanced perspective on the People's War and its conclusion with the April 2006 uprising of the Nepali people against autocracy and for democracy, one of the most significant moments in Nepal's modern history.

*Rama Lohani Chase defended her dissertation, Women and Gender in the Maoist People's War in Nepal: Militarism and Displacement, at Rutgers University in 2008. Currently, she is affiliated with the Institute of Advanced Communication, Education and Research (IACER) in Nepal.*